

## 2018 A Blade of Grass Fellow Brian Harnetty *Forest Listening Rooms: Shawnee, OH*

Field Research Report

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### Project Overview and Artist-Defined Goals

In *Forest Listening Rooms*, sound artist Brian Harnetty invites people who live in the vicinity of the Wayne National Forest in the Appalachian region of Ohio to gather in public outdoor spaces and, together, listen. They listen to sounds of the forest, to recordings he's remixed with excerpts of historical interviews and songs from local archives, to music he has arranged, and to each other's stories evoked by this experience. Harnetty contends that the act of listening to the sounds of these people and these places, past and present, can contribute to the transformation of the region's future. From the cave where the Knights of Labor trade union was secretly hatched, to the shore of a forest lake, to the location of a proposed new strip mine in a national forest—sites of extraction and sometimes recovery—people are invited to walk silently together, listen, and tell.

Harnetty explains that after eighty years of recovery, Wayne National Forest is once again under threat. New hydraulic fracturing (known as “fracking”) leases are expanding gas and oil extraction in the region. Residents are caught between their need for jobs in an economically depressed region, and their need to end decades of environmental degradation. These struggles too often play out as divides pitting right against left. *Forest Listening Rooms* brings local residents together over shared places and pasts: histories of growing up in the nearby towns, stories of hardworking ancestors, and pride about the region's long labor history and physical beauty. The hope is that these coming-togethers will serve a better regional future.

*Forest Listening Rooms* is a relational project, as much about the conversations it elicits before and after the actual Sound Walks as the intense experience of the listening events themselves. Through the project, Harnetty asks: “What does social change *sound* like? What are the stories of the forest and the people who live there? Through *listening*, how might people change personally, and how might they change the forest?”

### Narrative

Born into a multi-generational Appalachian family in southern Ohio and growing up in the city of Columbus, Harnetty's work as composer, musician, and sound studies scholar is inspired by southeastern Ohio's communities and addressed both to them and to a larger audience. This project is the latest iteration of Harnetty's long inquiry into the musical and sound history of Appalachia. The exploration has taken many forms, including archival research, sound walks and site recordings, ethnographic observations, musical performances, and sound compositions. He originally called the project *Fracked Forest Listening Rooms*, until he realized that the word “fracking” in the title divided people before they had a chance to come together. By dropping the first word, he begins with what southern Ohioans have in common: a love for the forest in whose environs many residents and their families have lived for generations. What's more, though fracking is causing problems now, it's not yet on everyone's radar locally; the aftermath of mining is still more pressing to many

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residents. Most important to Harnetty is to bring attention to the pattern of outsiders coming into the region with promises of a boom, extracting local resources, temporarily providing jobs, but ultimately taking the money made outside the region and leaving the people and the environment in worse states than they were before. But he bides his time.

The basic structure of Forest Listening Rooms is this:

- Harnetty leads a few people or a small group in a silent walk in the forest, listening together.
- They sit a bit at a bench and continue to listen to the surroundings for a few more few minutes.
- They listen to a recording integrating voices and sounds from his archival research that Harnetty plays via a portable speaker. (New voices will be layered in, from these walks.)
- Participants share stories about the forest and their personal histories.
- Harnetty records them.
- The group walks out of the forest. Harnetty arranges some follow up, one-on-one interviews so as to also get into the fracking issue.

On March 25, 2019, I participated in a Sound Walk in Shawnee, Ohio, population 650, with ten other participants. Stories flowed easily and included:

- One man described working for a year in a mine, as did many of the men in his family. He was glad to know what goes on there, and it was always pleasantly cool. But the mine was just four feet high, so he was also glad to leave it. He labored in oil fields for the rest of his working life.
- A local, largely amateur historian, and the first speaker's wife, grew up on a farm. As a child, she spent a lot of time on her own or with her siblings in nature. As a young parent, she accumulated great memories of taking her kids out in the woods, catching fish, cooking, practicing musical instruments, seeing bear tracks, etc. She wishes kids today had that freedom and spirit of exploration. Too much land has been privatized and there's too strong a draw of cell phones and computer games now, keeping them indoors.
- John Winnenberg, who works closely with Harnetty, also has great memories of being a child exploring the woods, catching salamanders, and sleeping under the stars. But he remembers vividly when all that ended: the day there was a foul smell, and he and his friends saw a man dumping something into the water. Everything in the creek died. He stopped going there.
- A woman who grew up in northern Ohio and now lives in this region inherited her love of the land and conservation from her father. Any woods are very dear to her.
- The mayor of Shawnee has deep roots in the county. Her great grandfather, losing his job due to mine closings in Pennsylvania, sought work in new mines opening in southern Ohio in the 1810s and 1820s. Her grandfather ended up with black lung. Her mother's side of the family were musicians and photographers. Nature, water, and hunting are all precious to her. She would like to see kids now back in nature. Part of her mission as the town's mayor (for which she is only paid \$110 per month) is to improve life for local people, develop more jobs, and strengthen especially young people's connection

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to nature.

- A man who grew up in the city of Columbus (ninety minutes away), remembered his family's country property in the Ozarks when he was a child. His pleasurable memories of the forest were similar to what others said even though it was a different place. He has been in this area for ten years, making relationships to particular creeks and wooded areas. It's a relationship that he says takes time to build but is very important to him.

Through the Sound Walk process, Harnetty is uplifting local people and honoring what they find meaningful. He hopes the Walks will play a role in community organizing efforts to stand up to fracking, the latest extraction effort coming into the region. He provides opportunities for people to come together from different points on the political spectrum. By working closely with John Winnenberg, who is from the immediate area and involved in organizing, business, environment, culture, tourism, and equitable development, Harnetty is finding ways to situate the walks more broadly in the future.

Harnetty recently led a listening session with a group of second- through fifth-graders on spring break, in Wildcat Hollow in the Wayne National Forest. They took a Sound Walk into the forest, and did a shortened version of his listening session (just long enough to not lose their attention). The kids had great stories and observations about what they heard and how to listen to the forest. Next up is an in-depth session with local landowners adjacent to the Perry State Forest. Just outside the Wayne National Forest, the Perry Forest is under review right now to be opened up to a new strip mine, so brings with it a sense of urgency.

In mid-May, Harnetty will do the final event of the A Blade of Grass Fellowship at Robinson's Cave. He's trying to decide how to frame it. It's the site where secret meetings led to creation of the first miners' union. Harnetty encounters a lot of people who believe unions did something useful back then but are corrupt now. They are proud of hard work and labor history, but not by and large pro-union. So, to evoke the power of collective organizing without over-identifying with the union movement, Harnetty hopes there will be a concrete outcome—ideally to keep fracking out of the region but realistically, anything that contributes to that great hope.

### Participant Perspectives

By the time of my visit late March, Harnetty had facilitated six listening rooms. It has not felt right to him to bring up fracking, partly because he's realized that it is not an immediate issue in the places that he's been. Moreover, the subject could easily polarize people, which doesn't feel good to do in the group listenings. And it could seem more self-serving than for the community. Harnetty intends to bring it up in follow-up interviews with people who have done the Sound Walk. He can "cash in" on the trust he's built through the slow careful process to date. The Sound Walk facilitates participant conversation about the place they love, sharing it with Harnetty, a semi-outsider, documenting. It also allows for reflection on their individual and collective pasts.

I had the opportunity to speak with the ten participants of the Sound Walk in late March when I visited Shawnee, thanks to a lunch that Harnetty hosted following the walk. Several commented how much they liked being silent together. The local historian said though she lives close, hadn't walked around that lake and

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enjoyed that. The mayor would like to extend what she did here today to others, both residents and visitors to the area. A woman from north of this area said, “Every person I heard on the recording sounded like my own family.” Hearing the recorded stories alongside the live stories made the historic voices come alive as real people, real places, not just for entertainment. The man from Columbus described the experience as “time travel . . . I felt I was back [in the Ozarks] of my youth.” Several people agreed that there are too many organized activities for kids today; not enough open exploration like they had.

John Winnenberg is Harnetty’s main collaborator on *Forest Listening Rooms*. He grew up in the coal mining region of southeast Ohio. He has a long history of involvement in economic development, culture, and environmental remediation and protection in Shawnee, Ohio and the greater Ohioan Appalachian region. He’s a businessman, one of the purchasers of the historic Tecumseh Theatre which he and his partners have been renovating for forty years. They now can use the street level for gatherings of different kinds.

Winnenberg and Harnetty met some ten years ago when Harnetty was doing ethnographic research in the region. They have become close colleagues since. Winnenberg has provided local credibility for Harnetty, and has been instrumental in inviting local people to participate in the current project. This is especially important in a region where people are wary of outsiders who too often come in with stereotypes about the region, which they don’t take the time to dispel, and take what they want in the form of photographs and interviews, without giving much in return. Harnetty has brought skills and talent through his sound projects to further the initiatives that Winnenberg cares so much about in improving the region.

Winnenberg studied journalism and special education in college and university. He wanted to return home after college, and took a job bringing people back to his region from state institutions. Understanding their pasts was crucial. He describes that experience as “our own listening project”—needing to hear from either them or their families to ascertain what they needed. He has seen what he describes as “other wounded communities” and understands listening as a form of healing. He described this project as “about them being somebody. And Brian showing that respect.”

While from Columbus, Harnetty has family members from Perry County but had not visited the region as a child. He first went to Shawnee with his university advisor who was doing ethnographic research in the region. When she was done, he kept coming back, and it became part of his dissertation work. Harnetty met Winnenberg when he encountered his recordings of people from several area towns for the county’s 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Harnetty digitized them, and began developing his own small sound archive. He has since also performed his musical compositions in Shawnee and engaged in post-show Q&As which he especially enjoyed.

The archival work also has a very personal dimension for Harnetty—it is a way to understand his own family’s past. His grandfather from Shawnee died before Brian was born, and Brian wanted to find out whatever he could about his life and times. Harnetty has also worked at Appalshop, a cultural center in Kentucky, where he learned a lot about documentation, archives, and the importance of place. He wanted to apply what he learned there to home.

Winnenberg greatly appreciates Harnetty’s work, trusting his impulse not to use what he learns about the people there “for shock value.” A lot of people come to the region, especially to attend Ohio University, not a

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few of which both men referred to as “takers,” and their documentation, often through photography, as “ruin porn.” Trusting Harnetty to not do that, Winnenberg brought numerous people to Harnetty’s local performance in 2016 and now to the Sound Walks through his many community connections. He sees Harnetty collecting and understanding the story of where he lives in an engaging way that, Winnenberg believes, “provokes people to think about their circumstance and experience anew.”

### Challenges and Strengths

Harnetty encountered a set of challenges initially, and developed the following strategies to overcome them:

- Though Brian’s people are from Perry County, where Shawnee is located, Brian is from a town ninety minutes away which makes him an outsider. He joined AmeriCorps as a way to get out into the community more, and show that he cares about the region, that the research is not only for him, and meet more local people. The AmeriCorps position is with two organizations where Winnenberg plays a leadership role, Winding Road and Ohio's Hill Country Heritage Area. Through AmeriCorps, Harnetty meets with local people, and his project is contextualized as telling stories of the region from local points of view. This is an antidote to stereotypes. Harnetty does not try to hide the poverty, but emphasize how people are trying to lift the region and themselves up. He also emphasizes how much there is to love there though clear environmental and economic challenges remain.
- Harnetty found he could go to people rather than wait for them to come to the Sound Walks. Therefore he sometimes did Sound Walks with only one or two people, which was a perfectly good way to get started.
- He spent time getting to know people first, only later asking to record their conversations, with questions focused on how they use the land around them (work, history, recreation).
- He changed the name of the project, as I explained earlier.
- He attached his listening sessions to other events including a new trail dedication, as well as the “Second Saturday” outdoor street fair that takes place in Shawnee.
- He is now trying to widen the circle of people interested so it is not all people affiliated with local history and higher education, such as getting the Shawnee’s mayor’s participation in the Sound Walk I participated in.

Winnenberg finds it hard to explain to people what Harnetty is doing. They need to experience it, and then they seem very comfortable with it. Winnenberg hadn’t heard Harnetty use the term contemplative to describe it, until the walk I attended. The term makes sense to Winnenberg, as he sees the project as part of the healing and recovery from the damage to the people and land from the various waves of extraction. He sees the listening as “a way to evolve from where we are now.” Winnenberg has meditated most of his life and wants it for neighbors, too. The mayor shared that she does yoga and deeply appreciates it as a practice. They both see the Sound Walks in the same spirit and appreciate that about them.

## Strengths

As Winnenberg noted, Harnetty is very patient, taking the time needed to develop relationships. He doesn't just rush in pursuing his own research goals, like engendering conversations about fracking. It became clear to him that people wanted to talk first about what they love in the region, then talk about ongoing challenges as a result of decades of mining, and maybe thereafter get into fracking.

On a deeper level, Harnetty is an artist who returned to his home place where, though admittedly somewhat isolated from an artist community, he felt compelled to first study and then add to the archive of local sounds and voices. As Robert Sember wrote in his essay about Harnetty for the second issue of A Blade of Grass Magazine, for an archive to exist, someone has to stay and listen.

## Affect and Effect

How is this project art, and how does its artfulness impact its social effect? How else does it try to have an effect in the world, and what kind of effect?

As regards affect, Harnetty noted, "I hadn't anticipated it being such a communal experience, especially with people I didn't know who might not trust me." At first he was reluctant to include music in the recordings he played during the Walks; he was just going to have archival voices from region. "But," he said, "many people seem to crave the pitch and sounds to make a transition from listening to the natural environment to telling their stories." So the beginning of the recording he plays on the Sound Walk is music—long sounds, clips from many musicians he asked to take including flute, sax, strings, piano but not all at once. He used the musicians he recorded individually as a sound archive, remixing it to lead into the archival voices from the nature listening.

Harnetty continues to explore the sensory process that leads to where he wants to go. He wrote in his interim report, "The conversations and stories seem to be affected by the listening that takes place before. I think this is at the heart of the project." Note the shift from his original sense that the project was primarily about fracking.

The project's intersection of affect and effect was epitomized for Harnetty by Shawnee's mayor's participation in the Sound Walk late March. For him, it symbolizes people's struggle between playing it safe in Trump's America, and helping people explore their circumstances in a supportive, non-judgmental environment. That is where his earlier interest in fracking and his evolving focus on listening to the forest and each other come together.

Nearing the end of the fellowship year, Harnetty asks how his work as a community volunteer and as an artist is working. The roles get more and more blurred for him. Harnetty now realizes that a shared sense of place is a way that people hold each other up in the region, whether there are jobs or not, and even in the face of environmental degradation. Their sense of pride in their home place can transcend the difficulties and, Harnetty hopes, perhaps spur them to resist economic pressure to succumb to environmentally harmful employment.

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Another recent development has been both Harnetty and Winnenberg's consciousness of the national implications of this hyper-local project. Winnenberg has come to see three stories of national significance that are uplifted through this project: labor/fair work; ethnicity/identity; and the environment. He originally looked at *Forest Listening Rooms* from a fracking point of view. Harnetty would like to literally enter a larger conversation that he has found in this project, especially about the relationship of the rural to the urban, and the importance of, and threat to, public land. He is considering writing about it as part of the next step. At the same time, he is interested in follow-up conversations specifically about fracking, but believes that taking this year to simply gather people in the ways he has was well worth the time and has provided a solid platform of trust from which to enter more controversial territory.